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## SEARCHING FOR TRUTH AND TRANSCENDENCE: THE PERENNIAL RELEVANCE OF PLATO

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### SYNOPSIS

Plato is arguably the greatest philosopher in history and has served as a cornerstone for two millennia of philosophy and theology. He has inspired some Christians, such as St. Augustine, to build on his foundation and has provoked others to try to dismantle it. In recent years, it has become fashionable in certain Christian circles to spurn Plato for some of his conclusions, such as his preference of the soul over the body. However, we need not agree with all he wrote in order to appreciate his work. Plato and contemporary Christians have many common enemies. Two of the most prevalent are relativism and naturalism. It benefits us to recognize that in many areas, Plato is our durable, capable ally in an ever-intensifying battle of worldviews.

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Nearly everyone has heard his name. Philosophers and theologians routinely reference him in their work, where he is praised or blamed, loved or hated. He is considered so important that more than two thousand years of human history have taken care to preserve his writings for generations to come. Most scholars contend that we possess all of his writings. This is remarkable, especially considering the ravages of history and the fickleness of human interest. Plato was a creative genius in addition to being a

revolutionary philosopher. Thus, his ideas are enjoyable to read and are perennially considered to be classic works of literature. Whatever we finally conclude about this great Greek thinker, his profound influence on Western thought and culture cannot be denied.

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead famously said, “The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”<sup>1</sup> If we grant even a grain of truth in Whitehead’s statement, then in order to be wise and informed participants in the market- place of ideas, we must have a basic grasp of Plato’s contribution to philosophy.

Plato (429 BC–347 BC) was the first of the ancient Greek philosophers to develop a thorough philosophical system. Earlier philosophers had developed large-scale metaphysical theories. Some of the more prominent contended that everything is ultimately water (Thales), everything is ultimately change (Heraclitus), or everything is ultimately an unchanging whole (Parmenides). But Plato surpassed them all in topical scope and literary magnitude. He developed theories in all the major areas of philosophy: knowing *how to act* (ethics), knowing *how we know* (epistemology), and knowing the nature of *what exists to be known* (metaphysics). As a passionate lover of wisdom, Plato sought knowledge about everything that mattered most. His philosophy inspired many great thinkers, including well-known Christians. After encountering Platonism, Augustine of Hippo abandoned his flirtation with Gnostic Manicheanism in favor of Christianity. And in more recent history, Plato’s philosophy deeply influenced C. S. Lewis’s theology.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, some Christians have a tendency to avoid the teachings of non-Christian thinkers, and such is frequently the case with Plato. Moreover, Plato is often denounced by Christian scholars. The well-respected theologian N. T. Wright, for instance, warns Christians against such hazards as “collapsing into Platonism,” which would lead to “denying the goodness of creation.”<sup>3</sup> However, the warnings of Wright and other anti-Platonist Christians can give readers the impression that Platonism lacks anything of value for the Christian. This is untrue. Furthermore, to ignore or roundly condemn such a great thinker is to risk missing out on useful insights that agree with and even intellectually support the Christian worldview. Since God is the Creator of the universe and the source of all truth, truth can be found throughout creation through His general revelation (Ps. 19; Rom. 1:18–21). I have become increasingly convinced that Plato has much to offer Christians, despite the fact that we may not agree with some of his conclusions. My focus will rest on two of the larger areas where Plato and Christians are on the same side.

## AGAINST RELATIVISM: PLATO'S DEFENSE OF OBJECTIVE TRUTH

Although he is an ancient philosopher, Plato is our ally in the fight against postmodern relativism. Over two thousand years ago, he successfully refuted the relativism we are surrounded by today. Belief in objective truth was a pillar of Plato's writings for his entire philosophical career. This conviction was at least in part a reaction to the disregard for truth in the political structure of his day. Historian of philosophy Frederick Copleston writes, according to Plato, "The [ideal] politician so formed will not be an opportunist time-server, but will act courageously and fearlessly in accordance with convictions founded on eternal and changeless truths. In other words, Plato aimed at producing statesmen and not demagogues."<sup>4</sup>

Plato realized that being firmly rooted in objective truth leads to more meaning and virtue than a life adrift. However, because truth does not bend according to popular opinion or fragile feelings, the rooted individual will need courage when truth arouses opposition.

A brief look at Plato's life will give us a fuller understanding of his commitment to objective truth. Plato was not always on track to be a philosopher. As the son of an aristocrat in Athens, young Plato (born Aristocles) initially planned to become a politician. But he was soon captivated by the teachings of an old philosopher named Socrates, who was known for challenging the dogmatism of anyone unfortunate enough to get into a conversation with him. Socrates was in the business of creating intellectual discomfort, quizzing those who had been content merely to accept received tradition without adequate reflection. By the end of his career, Socrates' philosophical prodding had upset so many Athenians that he was tried, convicted, and executed over false allegations.<sup>5</sup> Plato, in his late twenties, was present at the trial of Socrates. The execution of this polarizing old man provoked Plato's sudden shift from a budding politician into one of the most prolific and influential philosophers in history.

Plato was disgusted with the Athenians' treatment of Socrates, who was only trying to instill in them a passion for truth. In contrast to the truth seeking of Socrates, postmodernists of his day had become popular teachers. They taught students skills such as making a weak argument seem stronger in order to succeed in civic life. These itinerant professors were called Sophists, and to them, truth was unimportant. The only thing that mattered was the individual's ability to find success.

The most prominent Sophist, Protagoras, taught his pupils the famous phrase, "Man is the measure of all things." In other words, human beings *create*, rather than *discover*, meaning. Meaning, then, does not have real, independent existence, and is therefore up for individual interpretation. In the *Theaetetus* dialogue, Protagoras even states that being wrong is impossible.<sup>6</sup>

In the same dialogue, Socrates (who is the spokesman for Plato in most of these dialogues) offers several arguments against relativism, one of which I will address here. Socrates and a conversation partner discuss Protagoras's thesis that "man is the measure of all things," and Socrates inquires: "For if...each man is to form his own opinions by himself, and these opinions are always right and true, why in the world, my friend, was Protagoras wise, so that he could be thought worthy to be the teacher of other men and to be well paid, and why were we ignorant creatures and obliged to go to school with him, if each person is the measure of his own wisdom?"<sup>7</sup>

Plato, through the voice of Socrates, leads the reader to the conclusion that if we all can determine truth for ourselves, then to study under anyone else is a waste of time and money. But there is more to this argument. Socrates adds that if "man is the measure of all things," then those who disagree, such as Plato, are wrong. Plato is a man, too. So, to affirm Protagorean relativism is immediately to deny it by stating that select people, such as Plato, are *not* the measure of all things! This philosophy is self-refuting, and therefore, necessarily false. However, despite being refuted in Plato's era, relativism has returned. Thus, we should arm ourselves with Plato's timeless arguments as ammunition. But there is another area where Plato can be of help to our cause.

### **AGAINST NATURALISM: PLATO'S DOCTRINE OF FORMS**

In addition to postmodern relativism, another influential worldview of our age is naturalism. Naturalists typically contend that physical particles and processes are all that exist. The supernatural is thus ruled out. Naturalism is the predominant philosophy of academia, yielding a widespread bias against the rationality of theism. If natural processes are "all that is or ever was or ever will be," to quote Carl Sagan's famous line from *Cosmos* in 1980, then there is nothing permanent, transcendent, or objectively meaningful about life.

According to Plato, there must be something unchanging and universal about reality in order for there to be any meaning in the world. For instance, if I said to a friend, "I love black horses," that friend has to apply the adjective "black" and the noun "horses" to the same concepts I originally had in mind. The person hearing my sentence must have an idea of what "black" and "horses" objectively mean in order to understand me. Similarly, when a math teacher asks her students to add five and eight, the teacher and the students must all have the same ideas of "five" and "eight" in their minds. The math exercise is not up for individual interpretation.

How do we arrive at these common ideas? Furthermore, how is it that we can discuss the ideas of justice or beauty even if we have never seen, tasted, or touched them? Humans can meaningfully discuss justice without ever experiencing it. Plato

inferred that these truths require a world of abstract concepts, which he called forms.<sup>8</sup> Humans have not created these forms, but we discover them. Forms, such as the number two, blackness, and beauty, exist as part of the universe yet are located apart from the whims of our minds in a separate, invisible realm. Thus, forms exist without concern for our opinions. For example, no matter how badly a person wants to say that torturing the innocent for pleasure is good, that person is powerless actually to make such an atrocity good. In philosophy, this belief in the reality of abstract concepts is called *realism*.

Whenever I teach Introduction to Philosophy at a secular college, many of my predominantly naturalistic students are haunted by Plato's world of forms. Although they rarely deny that abstract concepts must really exist, what disturbs them is that the forms constitute a fundamentally antinaturalistic doctrine. If truth and meaning exist independently of our minds, then these things had to come from somewhere or someone. Plato pondered the same question and concluded that all these forms must come from something that is like them, yet greater than them. He called this "The Good." While Plato's Good is unlike the Christian God in significant ways, the theory does lay a foundation for a more fully orbed understanding of God as the transcendent yet personal source of all that is good. Augustine recognized this. He suggested that because the forms are basically ideas, and because ideas cannot exist apart from a mind, then the world of the forms must be present in the mind of God. In this way, Plato's doctrine of forms is not only antinaturalistic but also can serve as part of an apologetic for God's existence. For that, Christians should be thankful.

## RECONCILING WITH PLATO

Plato's value is timeless. Any false idea, no matter how new, can always be dismantled by good arguments, no matter how old. We must remember, however, that Plato was no Christian. Sometimes his conclusions were incompatible with a Christian worldview. But he was, after all, right about many vitally important things. Catholic scholar A. H. Armstrong summed up the matter beautifully:

*As against the host of materialists, relativists, pragmatists, positivists, deniers of any eternal universal and objective truths or standards, who dominate so much of our thinking today and whose feebler predecessors were dealt with by Plato in his time, we who still hold to the older tradition are on Plato's side and he and Socrates are on ours, and we should reverence them as of the greatest among the founders and fathers of our thought.<sup>9</sup>*

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## NOTES

- 1 Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 39.
- 2 For example, see C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory" in *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperOne, 2009).
- 3 N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 262.
- 4 Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Vol I: Part I* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1960), 154.
- 5 Plato wrote about the last days of Socrates in his *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*.
- 6 F. M. Cornford, trans., *Plato's Theaetetus* (New York: Macmillan/Library of the Liberal Arts, 1957), 160 c.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 161d–e.
- 8 Plato illustrates how the forms relate to the visible world and the human knower in his much-celebrated "Allegory of the Cave," which can be found in *The Republic*, Book 7.
- 9 A. H. Armstrong, *An Introduction to Ancient Philosophy* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983), 65.